

DOSSIÊ ÓPERA, TECNOLOGIA E NOVOS MEDIA

CONVERSATION WITH HAUKE
BERHEIDE AND AMY STEBBINS

João Pedro Cachopo

CESEM-NOVA/FCSH & University of Chicago

E-mail: jpcachopo@gmail.com

jpcachopo@fcsh.unl.pt

jpcachopo@uchicago.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26512/dramaturgias.voi10.24872>

RESUMO

Diálogo a respeito de ideias e experiências em produção contemporânea de Óperas.

Palavras-chave: Ópera, Produção, Tecnologia.

ABSTRACT

Exchange of ideias and experiences on contemporary production of Opera.

Keywords: Opera, Production, Technology.

Amy Stebbins and Hauke Berheide began their collaboration in 2015. Stebbins is a US-American writer-director, who received her artistic training at the Berlin Volksbühne and her scholarly training at Harvard (B.A.) and the University of Chicago (M.A., Ph.D.). Berheide is a German composer, focusing on opera and vocal music. His awards include the Festspielpreis der Bayerischen Staatsoper (2016), the Music Theater Now Prize (2013), the Rome Prize (2012), and the Missing Link Prize (2011). Together Stebbins and Berheide are committed to rethinking the standard artistic and institutional practices for new opera production. In 2016, the Bavarian State Opera commissioned *Mauerschau*, an evening-length production. In 2018, the Staatstheater Augsburg premiered their scenic concert for children *Einar hat 'n Vogel*. Upcoming projects include a second evening-length opera for the Frankfurt Opera. Stebbins and Berheide are also the co-founders of New Opera Dialogues, an international platform dedicated to artistic and institutional exploration of models for new opera production. In this conversation with João Pedro Cachopo, they discuss the motivations of their work against the background of the current information crisis, issues of interpretation, montage, and intermediality, as well as the fate of opera in today's ideologically convoluted world.

1. Este artigo integra um projecto que recebeu financiamento do Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme da European Union sob o grant agreement no. 708601.

JOÃO PEDRO CACHOPO [JPC] I would like to start this conversation by recalling your 2016 collaboration on *Mauerschau* for the Bavarian State Opera. Why did you choose this title? And how is it related to the main source text of your opera, Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea*?

HAUKE BERHEIDE [HB] Literally speaking, the word “Mauerschau” translates into English as “wall-show,” and is the German word for “teichoscopia”—the Greek theater device that stages an actor looking out over the audience, and verbally describing what he or she sees, which is invisible to the audience. Teichoscopia offers a way to stage “unstageable” scenes, typically of mass or extreme violence or even war, but it also creates a dilemma for theater in that the information it imparts is always mediated through the actor. The audience cannot verify the events the actor is describing. They have to blindly trust the speaker. This situation of epistemological dependence is the basis of *Mauerschau*.

AMY STEBBINS [AS] It's also the basis of Kleist's *Penthesilea*. Throughout his text, Kleist uses teichoscopia so excessively that it becomes a source of conflict in the narrative. Each time Penthesilea enters the battlefield to fight Achilles — her military opponent and incidentally the man she loves — she faints. Afterwards, she needs her soldiers to tell her what happened. In the final scene, she awakens to the devastating news that she killed Achilles. Unable to process this, she falls into despair, and ultimately takes her own life. We found this transformation of teichoscopic form into dramatic content an excellent point of departure for our own critique of the information crisis taking place today.

JPC Teichoscopia is so pervasive in Kleist's play that Goethe in fact criticized it as “unsichtbares Theater” — “invisible theater”.

AS Goethe feared audiences would be bored or confused by the lack of stage action. Interestingly though, an earlier draft of the play includes several additional stage directions, depicting actions that don't necessarily fit with the dialogue; for example, they indicate the presence of characters on stage, who have no lines. So when Kleist removes these stage directions in the final draft, these characters disappear. My sense is that Kleist imagined a much more active staging than the final script suggests.

JPC In contrast to Kleist's play, *Mauerschau* includes a fair amount of stage action, much of which plays out through the medium of video. How would

you describe the role and importance of video in rendering this work as it were “conceivable” and “playable” as an opera?

HB *Mauerschau* investigates how war is presented and represented, today and historically. Insofar as images — whether drawings, photography, or moving images — are a crucial part of that history, video was conceived from the beginning as an integral part of the opera’s narrating media. So, video does not solve a problem created by the words and the music. It does not render “the opera” conceivable. It is part of “the opera.”

AS *Mauerschau* is not speculative theater. It was written for a specific ensemble, at a specific time, and a specific place. All of these factors played a role in the opera’s formation.

JPC I see that your *modus operandi* is a far cry from the dichotomy between words and music, in the context of which video would play a mediating role, and that you understand opera as an intrinsically multi-media genre. Still, if I may push you a little bit further on this issue, I wonder how you would characterize the use of video in *Mauerschau* compared with the seminal example of the interlude of Berg’s *Lulu*.

HB I’m not sure if we succeeded in this, but our idea was to use video as a polished, impenetrable surface that represents the counterpart to the brutal, contradictory, disturbing world of violence (located in the music) that *Mauerschau* also has to address, or better yet, to evoke. This is fundamentally different from how film was used on the theater stage by figures like Piscator or Ruckert in the 1920s and 30s. The moving image for us is not a source of “truth” or evidence. It conceals the truth. Video in our opera stands in for mediality in general, and is then criticized as such. Film on stage is a curtain or a veil that prevents us from seeing things as they are.

JPC That also brings us to the question of production. Writing and producing a new opera requires a great deal of time, money, and work. What were your motivations behind dedicating so much time to the subject of war and the medial distribution of information?

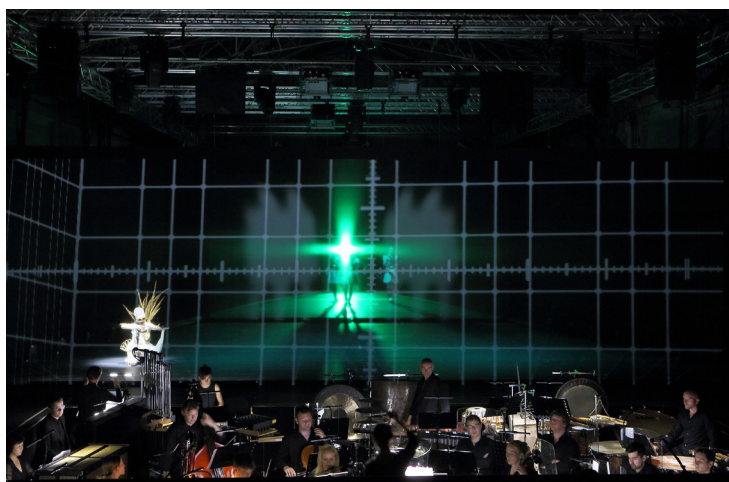


Fig. 1 Adriana Bastidas-Gamboa, Edwin Crossley-Mercer, Frederic Jost, and Joshua Owen Mills. Photo credit: Wilfried Hösl.

HB In the summer of 2014, Amy and I were confronted with a situation somehow similar to Penthesilea's. If you remember, that spring bore witness to the Russian annexation of Crimea, the first appearance of ISIS in Western news media, and Israel's devastating airstrikes against Gaza. During that conflict, Amy and I were at a wedding in the West Bank, which put us closer to a site of inter-state violence than either of us had ever experienced. And yet, the situation was largely the same as if we had been in Germany. Even though only 40 km. away from the actual site of violence, people in the West Bank relied on the same media to inform themselves as people in Germany or in the US.

AS We were also unsettled by discrepancies between the information provided by US-American and German media. Little did we know that what in 2014 seemed like a kind of personal anxiety would by 2016 be an international media crisis with new terminology like "fake news" and "alternative facts." One review even described *Mauerschau* as "Opera in the age of the *Lügenpresse*".

JPC Could you further elaborate on how your collaboration started and evolved? Would you explain the working process? Was the libretto finished when the composition started? Or did you work on both the musical and textual dimensions simultaneously?

AS Because we were working with a source text this time, we didn't need to develop an original story. So the process started instead by determining together with the designers which media would be required for which aspects of the narrative (and the critique) we wanted to communicate. For example, during this phase we already worked out how the dramatic climax — when Penthesilea is told that she has killed Achilles — would make use of a specific interaction between the singer, the text, and the video projection.

HB Once Amy had completed a kind of scenario and sketched the trajectory of the twelve scenes, I began to construct the musical dramaturgy, and to develop concrete musical motives. We then worked simultaneously on the libretto and the music up until the day of the premiere.

Fig. 2 Joshua Owen Mills, Hildegard Schmahl, and Frederic Jost. Photo credit: Wilfried Hösl.



Fig. 3 Adriana Bastidas-Gamboa as Penthesilea. Photo credit: Wilfried Hösl.



JPC For the libretto, you use not only Kleist, but also to Karoline von Günderrode and Friedrich Nietzsche. You also cite political figures such Donald Rumsfeld and Joschka Fischer. Considering that *Penthesilea* should also be interpreted as an artistic reflection on the international state of affairs, how would you describe the importance of citation and montage in bridging your artistic and political concerns?

AS My work as a librettist is informed by the theater of Frank Castorf, who uses citation to create what we could call “constellations” that outline historical connections between ideas. This practice helps me to stage a critique that resonates with multiple historical moments, and not just one. For example, in *Mauerschau*, texts by Kleist, Nietzsche, and Rumsfeld reinforce one another insofar as each articulates a reactionary view about how we ought to act when we don’t have all of the information. By bringing these disparate authors together through citation, we can evoke the long history of the *Mauerschau* problem.

JPC In that sense, it looks like you take an “untimely” [unzeitgemäß] approach to the way in which Nietzsche has been read and appropriated.

Fig. 4 Annotated libretto with work-notes by the composer From the program booklet: Malte Krasting.

The image shows a page from a libretto for the opera *Mauerschau*. The text is annotated with handwritten notes and color-coded boxes. The annotations include:

- Top left:** "X. Pata Morgana" and "Die Botin erscheint".
- Top right:** "Heiner Müller, Philoktet" and "Kleist, Politische Schriften, leicht umformuliert".
- Middle left:** "Botin (singend)" and "Achill". Handwritten notes include "Songreminiszenz" and "Beziehung zum ersten Traum (Szene III)".
- Middle right:** "XI. Heldenat". Handwritten notes include "Achill tritt wieder auf, die blutbedeckte Penthesilea hinter sich herschleifend - Sie hält eine große Partisanenfahne in der Hand, die sich schleifend über die Bühne entfaltet" and "Achills Motiv einleitung mit Röhrenglocken".
- Bottom left:** "Botin" and "Beide Schatten". Handwritten notes include "Motiv 'Nun, o Unsterblichkeit'" and "Achill setzt seine Nachtsichtbrille auf und geht ab zum Zweikampf".
- Bottom right:** "Arie". Handwritten notes include "Pendelmotiv, chromatische Absätze (passus durusculus)" and "Obertonklang, hoher Liegeklang -> Apotheose".

The color-coded boxes highlight specific text elements, such as "Gedicht von Hannes Küpper", "Kleist, Penthesilea", "Kleist, Brief an Henriette Vogel", "Kleist, der Prinz von Homburg", "Kleist, Politische Schriften, leicht umformuliert", "Joschka Fischer", and "Donald Rumsfeld".

HB The major difference between scholarship and art is that art doesn't care about fair evaluations of historical figures. We are not interested in Kleist per se. We don't care about Nietzsche. We need their texts for an artistic reflection on our time. Their texts offer us testimonies that articulate political tendencies that then developed later in certain ways. At the same time, they are also "just" texts, rhetorically brilliant invitations to be positioned within a new context. That is already very contradictory. The new context necessarily ignores certain aspects of its original context so that it may both shed newer, brighter light on the subject on stage, the world today, and also back on the text itself. That is a highly speculative procedure. From a philological perspective we are probably always "wrong." From a contemporary perspective, we are right. That doesn't give us license to be intellectually sloppy. But a citation in an artwork is a cultural evocation. The cultural memory about a text is as much a part of the text as any kind of philological truth.

JPC If I may linger on the question of quotation, montage, and interpretation... Does their relevance vary in your practice – and, if so, in what sense – depending on whether we are referring to textual, musical or visual elements? More precisely: how would you differentiate allusions to, say, a playwright like Kleist, a composer like Strauss, or filmmakers like Visconti, Syberberg, Godard, or Welles?

AS Citation is essential to our understanding of opera's political work in that it prevents the work of art from sealing itself off from the world in which it exists. Citations work like my index finger. They point away from the work of art, back out at the world. Citation also has the attractive character of never creating equivalences between events or things. Instead they draw attention to the relationships between ideas. It is much more interesting (and honest) to put Donald Trump's words into a fictional character's mouth than to dress a singer up as a blond Cheetoh and have him say and do things that Trump himself never did.



JPC The reason why I choose those four names [Visconti, Syberberg, Godard, and Welles] is not arbitrary. They all incorporate — albeit in different ways — aspects, conventions, and potentialities of opera in their singular cinematographies. Against the background of the debate on opera and film, I wonder how film — not only as a medium but also as an art — might have influenced your understanding of music, theater, and opera.

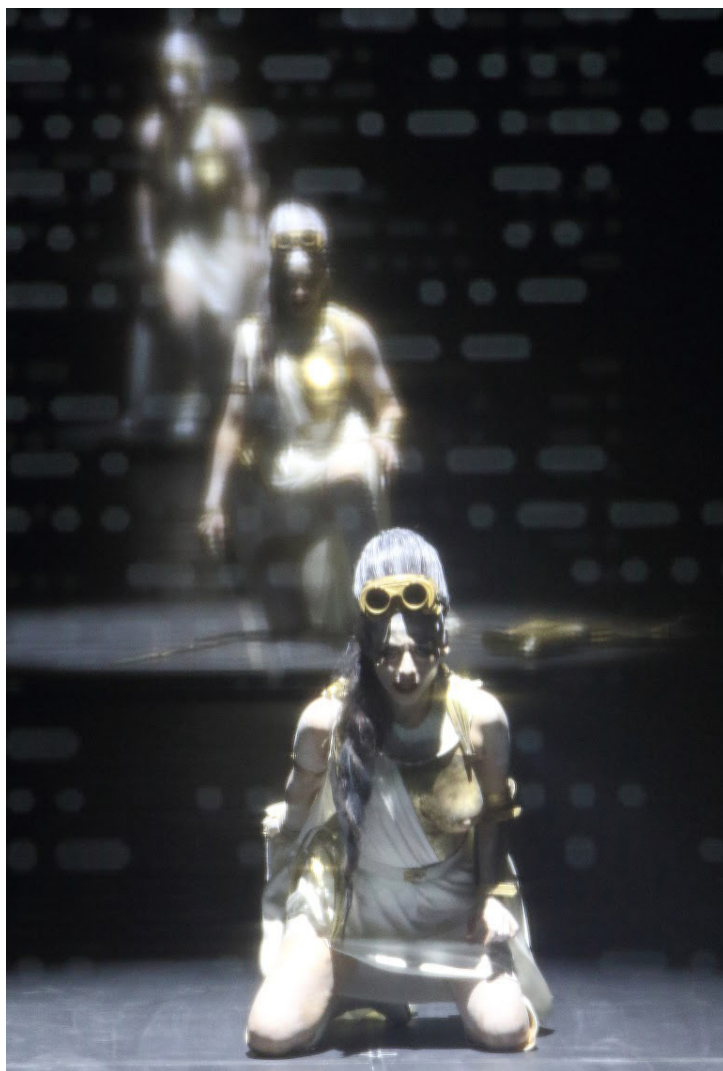
Fig. 5 Hildegard Schmahl, Hanna Herfurtner, Leela Subramaniam, and Adriana Bastidas-Gamboa. Photo credit: Wilfried Hösl.

HB Film is the most limited of all artistic disciplines that incorporate performance. While a dramatic text or a score can be realized, staged, developed, augmented, and refocused in infinite varieties, a movie will always only be that one version. It is frozen in time, dead; its interaction with any kind of “presence” has already passed the moment the final “cut” is made. In that sense, I pity film. Billy Wilder’s *Ariane* will never have the chance to react to #metoo. *Mauerschau* in contrast can theoretically react to whatever the future brings, as long as there are directors, video artists, and conductors, who take the right to be artists and interpret the work. Opera is potentially immortal.

On the other hand, film has very much defined our vocabulary for narrative strategies, the way we tell stories, and artistically explain a world. There is, for example, the “cut,” or the “flashback.” The “wide shot” of a situation. The “close-up.” These are cineastic terms, which I use in music all the time. Some of them are older than film: montage, for example — which, for me includes the idea of fragments — is more a literal, romantic technique that was later taken up by films. On the other hand, because film is working with frozen time, it can also rule time in a more despotic way. Slow motion, repetition, still images — these are techniques I refer to a lot in my work...

In fact, for myself, I have a term *Ohrenkamera* or “Ear Camera.” In a normal (spoken) play, the actors’ physical presence is identical with their characters’ scenic presence. This frees up the audience to determine for themselves whom or what to watch. There are no close-ups, no wide-shots. In opera, the incorporation of the singers into the music means that the composer directs the audience’s perception. Only singing characters are “visible” in opera. Only singing characters exist. As the composer, I can also zoom in on a certain relationship between a character on stage and an event off-stage. I can compose close-ups or wide-shots. I can write slow-motion. Or “time-lapse” techniques. This control over narrative time and over focus, over the narrative frame is something opera and film share — much more than they do with dramatic plays. And what composers can learn from Godard will have to do with his mastery over this aspect of his medium.

Fig. 6 Adriana Bastidas-Gamboa, Leela Subramaniam, and Hanna Herfurtner. Photo credit: Wilfried Hösl.



JPC Certain authors — Stanley Cavell, for one — have also considered the encounter between opera and cinema through a geographic lens. Opera would then epitomize an old, European genre, whereas cinema would represent the promises and potentialities of a new art flourishing in a new world. Things are not so simple, though. In fact, the “conservative” connotation of opera tends to be stronger in the US than in Europe. The fact that “Eurotrash” is sometimes employed as a synonym of “Regieoper” on the west side of the Atlantic would be enough to deter us from oversimplifying the matter. As an American dramatist and a German composer, how do you see this American/European divide from a cultural, aesthetic, and political perspective?

AS The first difference is the institutional mission: how artists and administrators understand why they produce what they produce. In the United States, opera is understood as a form for telling stories and generating collective emotional experiences. An audience is there to “learn something new” by walking a mile in someone else’s shoes. In the German-speaking context, opera is much more about critical intervention in the public sphere, at least ideally. An opera — especially new work — is expected to say something about its historical moment. Wouldn’t you agree?

HB Yes, but this difference plays out not only in terms of institutional mission, but has ideological implications as well. As a German living in the US, I see one major difference in the understanding of what an “interesting topic” for a new piece could be, and this difference can be found in both opera as well as in film: Americans are interested in individuals, Germans in the relationships between individuals. American artists contribute to their country’s commitment to the myth of the original genius, god, a president, a terminator, a hero, a villain. That’s not only boring. It is also wrong and ideologically pernicious. The loser, these operas and movies say, loses because of his own mistakes, and not because of structural conditions, like economic ones, for example. Likewise, the winner wins on account of his individual strength. So no American audience will ever be inspired to start a revolution. But I would very much like to incite a revolution! Amy and I (and also most of our colleagues in Germany) would always accept the challenge to explain to an actual audience why this production has been put on stage in this city in this year. There is no longer any room for narcissistic heroes. Really not.



Fig. 7 Hanna Herfurtner, Hildegard Schmahl, Leela Subramaniam, and Adriana Bastidas-Gamboa.

JPC Speaking of the future, I know you are currently working on a composition for children. Could you tell me a bit more about this piece and/or indicate any connections with your previous work?

AS This piece is a “concert for the ears” called ***Einar hat 'n Vogel***, which you could translate as either “Einar has a bird” or “Einar is nuts.” It tells the story of a grumpy lighthouse operator, who wants to be left alone. Unfortunately for Einar, on this particular night, a storm blows a helpless, frightened bird into his home. He tries to get rid of the bird, but when the storm builds up into a hurricane and the lighthouse begins to tremble, Einar too needs to... “take flight.” I won't say anymore.

HB This piece is something of a response to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany, and our sense that, in a region where 15% of the adult population voted for the far-right party (the AfD), theater makers have a responsibility to defend democratic, humanitarian values. Part of that responsibility is educating young people.

JPC What about your plans for the future?

AS After ***Einar***, we begin working on an evening-length opera for the Frankfurt Opera called ***The People Out There***. This piece deals with a kind of class alienation occasioned by the rise of social media. Through the lens of the main character, Mary, the opera depicts three different worlds, or maybe better said, three different relationships to the world. There is the world of Mary's workplace, a sleek, multi-media headquarters experienced only through a kind of augmented reality technology. This world is hyper-active, consistently interrupted by push-up messages, chats, and advertisements. The second world is the interior world of Mary's body — a world she only has access to when the AR system deactivates. The third world is the apocalyptic landscape outside the headquarters, inhabited by the ambiguous and desperate “people out there”. Like ***Mauerschau***, this project will require multimedia narrative strategies. But first, the two of us need to complete the basic story outline, the *fable*. Altogether, the process should take about two years.

HB One of the major sites of cultural reflection on these issues is the series ***Black Mirror***. This is an exciting challenge. The success of these online series presents opera with unusual competition. Our opera will have to reflect on the narrative and cineastic innovations of these productions to prove its contemporaneity. ***The People Out There*** will also be a search for an adequate response to that challenge.

Recebido em: 25/01/2019 | Aprovado em: 20/03/2019